

Chapter 54: Pep Talk

When someone sat on the bench beside me, it was enough to drag me out of my lethargy. Most people didn't approach me without a reason, scared off by who I was, so I half-expected someone to start begging for my help or maybe for an autograph, although it was widely known that I didn't like requests for that.

I could also soon feel a knife pressing against my side, though that was unlikely. My enemies, of those who remained, wouldn't be dumb enough to attack me in such a public place. Then again, I'd been dumb enough to trust Sanya...

"You done fucked up this time, Zae-zae," said the person beside me.

My grandmother. Of course. That made much more sense than my other theories.

I pulled an acknowledging noise from somewhere deep inside, dully wondering what would happen next. Would she scold me here, in public? That might be humiliating, but it didn't seem likely. We didn't want to panic the public with our problems, so long as we still could.

So, would she brush what had happened under the rug instead, telling me what to do? I'd eagerly await that.

Eventually, Talira said, "This is good."

Rapidly blinking, I twisted toward my grandmother while leaning away, and although she continued staring straight ahead, she smiled, probably in response to getting a reaction out of me.

"How is... what just happened *good*?" I hissed.

Damn. I'd almost told the world about the poisoning of Lutov's leadership. What was wrong with me? No. What was wrong with Talira, calling that good?

"Have I ever told you about when my *shukusen*, Dranek, sent me on a routine check of the Eastern Reach's production facilities?" she said.

"I..."

Where the hell had that come from?

"No," I said. "You never talk about when you were... me."

Nodding, Talira said, "I don't like thinking about it. It was..."

She said nothing more, but then, she didn't have to. Except for Korix, I was the only other person in the world who could understand.

"Anyway, I set out, determined to finish the inspection as quickly as possible. I was irritated that Dranek had given me such a basic mission when I had so many other tasks to do," Talira said. "When I arrived, I rushed through the inspection, finding nothing suspicious, and satisfied, I left. I was halfway back to Xygek when I got the message. During my sweep, I'd missed something. To this day, I don't know what it was, but it caused a catastrophic failure of the production facility's machinery, starting a chain reaction of explosions that irradiated a good sixth of the Eastern Reaches."

As I snapped my eyes open wide, I could feel my eyebrows flying for my hairline, even as Talira grimly nodded.

"It was a nightmare. So many people were killed, which would have been bad enough, but without the resources that those production facilities had created, Lutovish citizens across the homeland would have started starving within the year," she says. "I was distraught, of course, mostly because of what had happened but also because I'd failed as the *Lokke Vitras*. When I returned to Xygek, I thought for sure that Dranek would kill me for what I'd done. He was... not a kind man. But he just sat me down for a talk, and once we were done, I left, confident that I could fix the mistake I'd made."

I badly wanted to ask how she'd done that, but another question seemed more pressing.

"How have I never heard about this?" I said.

Grinning, Talira rested her hand on my knee.

"That's what I'm telling you, Zae-zae," she said. "In their time holding the role, every *Lokke Vitras* in Lutov's history has fucked up as badly as you just have. I certainly did. When he sat me down to talk, Dranek told me about his mistake, and if you're very persistent, Korix might share his worst failing with you. We have all done things that have endangered to homeland. I'm surprised yours took so long to get here and yet..."

She gestured for me to fill in the blank.

"I've never heard about these mistakes," I said.

"Because the way we solved them erased our involvement in how they started," Talira finished.

I saw what she was trying to do, and even knowing it to be a manipulation, it was working. Instead of letting hopelessness numb me, I'd started thinking about how I could follow in my predecessors' footsteps. Before I could devote myself to that pursuit, though, I needed to tie off the loose threads of Talira's tale.

"So, how did you do it?" I asked.

Sighing, Talira leaned back on the bench, resting her arms on it with her legs spread wide.

“I had to do some things I’m not proud of. I certainly won’t talk about them with you,” she said, “but I also made a few things right. Back in my day, the entirety of Ibis was devoted to Lutov’s pleasure, in one way or another. Because we provided what they needed to survive, no one across the water had an ordinary life. We shuffled them through professions and the many forms of our torture like a card deck. It was a sordid time, one I don’t like thinking about, but because of my colossal mistake, I gained enough leverage to convince Vaessa of a plan I’d had in the works for years.

“Crinas and Flosari, where Ibis’ most fertile ground lay, would become farmland with the citizens of those nations tending to them, and we would use the food that they produced to keep from starving. It wasn’t much, that small loosening of our control, but it set a precedent that’s been followed to this day. It also solved one of Lutov’s problems in such a ‘groundbreaking’ and ‘novel’ way—”

Talira grimaced as she made air quotes.

“—that people fixated on it for years, long enough to sweep other issues under the rug. There’s more to it than that, but still, that’s the gist of my fuck up’s solution.”

Huh. I’d never thought that my grandmother might sympathize with the children of Ibis, but it made sense. Unless she was required to do otherwise, she was pretty hands-off with that landmass.

Not that anyone’s personal beliefs mattered right now.

“Do you have any suggestions for how to handle my mistake?” I asked. “I’d assume you do, otherwise you’d never have descended from on high to walk among the commoners.”

Talira whacked the back of my head.

“Shut up, smart ass,” she said. “Of course I have suggestions.”

Saying nothing more, she crossed one leg over her knee, and I sighed.

“Which are?” I drawled.

Wagging a finger on the bench’s backrest, Talira said, “Uh-uh. First, say please.”

Oh, Mother Time. Were we really doing this? After taking a calming breath, I smiled at her.

“Please,” I smoothly said.

“Good,” Talira said. “Now say, ‘I promise that I will listen to you from now on, oh most great and wise and magnanimous of *shukusenth*.’”

My pleasant mask cracked.

"I promise to listen, and you can shove the rest up your ass," I said. "Congratulations. You've cheered me up. Now, tell me what to do."

Pouting, Talira said, "You only had to ask."

But then, her mischievous act melted away, returning her to the steady woman I knew. Hell, how well did she know me to pinpoint the exact mode of behavior that would drag me out of my lethargy?

Straightening, she rested her folded hands on her crossed legs.

"Right now, we have two problems to tackle: backlash from the other Houses and of course, the neurotoxin," she said. "You *cannot* go near the first of these, my *Lokke Vitras*, even knowing as I do that fixing it will be your first inclination. Let me handle it. Instead, I want you to focus on the other issue."

When she paused, I said, "Yes, my *shukusen*."

Because what else could I say? I couldn't argue with her when she was right.

"We should gather our resources first," Talira said. "I'm sending you to retrieve a few scientists. You'll find two of them at an old testing facility in Ostiu. It's called Kalaski. You may have heard of it?"

"Yes. I've visited the place on inspections," I said, "although I should mention that when I was there, something felt... off. I've never had the time to investigate it, though."

Nodding, Talira rubbed her hands together.

"It's good that you've been there before," she said. "Because you have, this visit might not distress you as badly."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Talira just shook her head.

"You'll see," she said. "When you retrieve these scientists, you'll need your brother. He'll help you get there more quickly, and they're unlikely to leave Kalaski unless their *shukusen* orders them to. Those two have no respect for the *Lokke Vitras*."

And normally, I'd need nothing more to like someone, but with the way she'd said that, I wasn't sure that qualifier applied this time.

"Your brother already knows about this," Talira said. "After you meet with him, ask him any questions you have about the scientists. He'll be ready to leave whenever you are."

Great. I hadn't thought about that. She was talking about my brother, meaning Pheniks, meaning *the man who'd helped start this calamity*. This coming trip wouldn't be a disaster *at all*.

Rather than dwelling on that, I said, "Who else am I gathering?"

"There's only one more person, but you won't need to retrieve her," Talira said. "When I asked them, your friend volunteered to pick her up."

Cocking my head, I said, "Really? Does Damari know this scientist?"

"Indeed," Talira said. "She's their sister."

Ah. Ok. Having Damari retrieve her made sense, then. Familial relationship and all-

Wait-a-minute.

"WHAT?" I shouted, lowering my voice when Talira lifted an eyebrow. "Misah? She's unHoused!"

"If I'm recalling this correctly, so were you when you handled the Ancients Crisis," Talira said. "I've been watching her progress for years, my *Lokke Vitras*. She's the most brilliant, unHoused scientists I've seen in centuries, easily at the level of Zan and Cerullis' highest Strata. In fact, she's good enough that I might make her the *shukusen* of that troublesome House once this is over. We'll see."

She shrugged before pinning me with her gaze.

"What I'm saying is that you shouldn't judge her because she's young," she continued. "I promise you. We'll need her before the end."

With my elbows on my knees, I rubbed my temples, shaking my head.

"I'm not judging her," I said. "It's just... she's Damari's sister."

"And you're worried she'll get hurt," Talira said.

Nodding, I dug my fingers into my skin until Talira pulled one of my hands away.

"So what if she is?" she said. "One girl's life will never be as important as Lutov's safety."

Wrinkling my nose, I opened my mouth to retort, but Talira painfully twisted her hold on my hand, stopping me.

"No. You listen to me, like you promised," she said. "I understand why you keep loved ones in your life. Over the last one hundred years, you've proven, time and again, how much better they make you at what you do. As much as they're your greatest strength, however, they're also your greatest weakness, and you still haven't learned how to overcome it. I don't want to see the best *Lokke Vitras* that Lutov's ever seen brought low because he couldn't find the strength to grapple with a

simple truth. Because of who you are, your loved ones will get hurt. It's inevitable. So, accept this fact and move on."

With Talira carefully watching me, I swallowed and nodded. I wondered if she knew how loudly I was screaming *NEVER* in my head as I did, but she must not have heard it, given that she released me.

"Good. And I'm sorry," she said. "Now, what will you do?"

Never one to dwell on unpleasant moments, this one.

"Collect Pheniks from where he's hiding," I said. "Then, secure my 'weakness'. If the *shukusen* approves."

Talira didn't comment on my obvious jab, merely inclining her head in assent.

"As soon as they're settled, I'll head to Kalaski," I said. "I'll keep you updated, but I don't expect that this will take me more than a couple of days."

"A solid plan," Talira said. "Once you've brought the scientists back, they can work on an antidote for the neurotoxin while we discuss Cerullis. Twice that House has threatened Lutov in less than two centuries, and that is unacceptable."

"Do you have a plan to keep them in line?" I asked.

Narrowing her eyes, Talira stared at nothing.

"I have ideas," she said before slapping her knees, "but that's for when you get back. After all, you have a fuck up to fix. So, go!"

Lifting a hand, she flicked her fingers at me, and I rolled my eyes.

"A pleasure as always, my *shukusen*," I said.

After getting to my feet, I bowed to her, but then, I departed the park, leaving Talira on the bench behind me.

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